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ABSTRACT

A review of literature on the principal's changing role in shared decision making is provided in this paper, which discusses the following areas: policy development; the egalitarian ethic for teacher participation; the principal/faculty relationship; the principal's functions in shared decision making; and elements of successful decision making. The principal is crucial to effective shared decision making. Recommendations for the principal include improving knowledge about participative decision making in the literature, allowing time to initiate dialogue, establishing an agreement with the district administration, and providing faculty training. The issue is not one of losing influence, but rather of offering initiative to the greatest number of professional staff possible. (15 references) (LMI)

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# Shared Decision Making and the Transition of the Principalship

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## Transcending the Principal's Role in Shared Decision Making

### Introduction

The current wave of education reform is producing several basic changes to the school policies as they relate to the management process. The movement toward the accepted theory that schools work best when principals and teachers are more involved in problem-solving at the building level, known as shared governance, is one of the results of this restructuring. Today we find many of the reform proposals calling for increased teacher participation in decision making, erroneously referred to as "teacher empowerment".

It may be necessary, however, to begin to delineate several of the often referred to generic terms of restructured schools. Until we begin to separate and unravel the issue between "teacher empowerment" and shared decision making, as well as site-based management, these school management and policy concepts will need to stand separately for better understanding. If we are truly to "restructure" our schools, we must apply a broad range of instructional, organizational and curricular alternatives to the traditional school's operational procedures. If we are to select the two most prevalent ways, we will increase teacher involvement in policy development process as well as examine the management decision making process.

An unending stream of material has been written and expounded upon about teacher empowerment within site-based management. But trying to find significant literature necessary to alter the principal's role in a shared decision making process

environment is challenging. Each of us must keep in mind the principal can bring about school procedures which allow for limited decision-making authority within the school, but only the district may develop policies which allow true site-based management. Clearly delineated leadership roles at the school building level are necessary for effective staff participation in decision making. But one of the unchanged tasks of the principal's authority and perspective is to keep reform focused in the direction of instruction and student learning.

Changing the Principal Model for Decision Making

Decision making at its best is a complex structure with many complicated tasks involved. If the organization is to be efficient where a myriad of decisions are made, people and programs are coordinated, communication and channelled positions allocated, staff recruited, schedules developed, and resources obtained and utilized, decision making must be shared (Garcia, 1986).

Why are principals and researchers so hesitant to address the necessary job alterations that the principal will need to make if the staff of a school is to be truly a shared decision making team? Most principals are not comfortable with change which is not clearly defined and leaves the chance for many unknowns, and most will admit they were not trained to work with shared decision making procedures. Robert Holzmiller, principal of Hopi Elementary School in Scottsdale, Ariz. says he is not ashamed to admit his district movement to site-based decision

making has left him scared (as cited in Bradley, 1990). The distinct fact that principals are scared tells us basically they are not prepared for the task of being a principal of a shared decision making team. Preparing the principal to facilitate the team is no easy job. The question remains: Do we just tell the school to begin shared decision making or do we find a way to make every one in the process feel a part of the ownership as we attempt to solve the problems at the closest point to the source.

Addressing the issue at the policy table, either at the school or district level, is the only way all partners are going to become truly a part of the process and be knowledgeable of their roles. School administrators and teachers both have legitimate roles to play in the policy process. One cannot forget that the school board also is a crucial link to the community and must balance the role to ensure that authority is appropriately shared (Phillips, 1989).

In the development of policy involving decision making, a critical component that must be recognized which is crucial both to the central administration and the board and the building level management, is clearly the decision making process at both the district and the building level. Before the school board considers shared decision making at the school level, it should study extensively what the effect will be on present policy.

Prior to beginning a shared decision making process at the building level, a policy needs to be developed identifying participants and setting the guidelines (Phillips, 1989). The board may define the respective roles of the administrators and

teachers as well as other staff members; the board policy can establish a process for appropriately shared decision making. Establishing a policy addressing concerns eliminates many problems resulting from groups attempting to negotiate positions.

When the mechanics are put into place to facilitate the change to shared decision making, some people are uncomfortable with their changed roles. This phenomenon may be a result of the "disturbing the way things are" syndrome. People often become distressed when structure is altered, even a non-effective one. If we ever hope to improve our schools effectively and efficiently, however, we must develop vision and courage.

Egalitarian Ethic

Lieberman (1988) stated "that a teacher is a teacher no matter how experienced, how effective or how knowledgeable" (p. 7). The way we look at teachers and how we perceive their roles and functions is most important if we are to alter roles and perceptions. Too often teachers are seen only as classroom facilitators or participants; their function and respect is confined to the arena of the classroom. Ironically, one of the major sources of the tension resulting from this misconception, comes from the teachers themselves over their own conflict of values. By working in collaborative situations, teachers are exposed to new ideas from the people who best understand the complexity of the situation - administrators, colleagues, district staff and parents.

Another problem teachers confront in work groups is a lack

of experience with debating issues and building consensus. Working on group dynamics and the art of compromise early in the transition period may be time well spent and critical to group decision making and consensus (Rummler, 1989). It will be helpful if teachers learn the essential relationship between autonomy and accountability. Making decisions can lead to conflict and mistakes; even when the group finds a solution to a problem, often a new set of challenges appears.

When teachers and principals have developed a clear understanding of their desired expectations, a common belief should emerge: teaching effectively will increase student learning. Belief in that commitment and a set of principles will put in motion a positive set of student expectations. A shared sense of ownership, then, results in shared leadership to create success for students (Chopra, 1989).

## Where Do We Find The Principal?

What is the role of the principal in a shared decision making environment? Using the premise that shared decision making is "ultimately only as effective as the position impact it has on student learning" (Chopra, 1989, p. 46), the principal has a direction, mission and a set of goals to work from. Many principals now involved in shared-decision making feel that they originally did not have a direction or a set of goals to work from. The anxiety that these principals feel is the result of a lack of a clearly delineated definition of restructuring. What is considered shared decision making in one district is far

different from the formalized process in another district in which the teachers' union contract spells out who will sit on the team and how the team will make decisions (Bradley, 1990).

The different expectations of principals and the lack of a mutually acceptable decision-making process can generate underlying feelings of hostility on the part of the staff. Trust among colleagues can disintegrate. Forcing teachers to use new skills that make them uncomfortable may create a challenge to the principal's leadership ability (Meadows, 1990). In this new role the principal is likely to be the target of anger and criticism because by definition, he must challenge some group norms. The principal must be prepared to deal with teacher discomfort in the process of change. In essence, principals using shared decision making have challenged some faculty traditions.

Experienced administrators would readily admit that one of the most significant strategies in a school is to prepare the institution to be successful in its ability to cope with uncertainty (Marsh, 1958). It is necessary to determine to what extent their subordinates control the process. This issue is one of the challenges the principal must address. The idea of leaving staff members in control of uncertainty is directly opposed to many administrators' desires for control and cooperation.

Another problem the team in a shared decision making school must address is the time involved. Ann Bradley (1990) finds " one of the greatest obstacles to participatory decision making in school is the blue collar mentality among teachers who are not

willing to work beyond school hours" (p. 24). Where principals and teachers are in agreement about shared decision making, the principal must find ways for released time from the classroom for committee work. It is necessary for the membership of any shared decision team to provide greater flexibility and the opportunity to make change. Membership on a shared decision team will increase the influence of the teachers, as well as communication and cooperation among teachers, parents and other community members (Clune & White, 1988).

What should teachers expect by working together? First, they will strengthen the link of communication with the principal. Further, teachers should feel they have more to say in the decision process and can express their concerns or ideas. By working together to develop the school, the teachers are much more sensitive and better able to respond to the needs of students. The principal, in conjunction with the team, will need to plan programs to understand better the objects of shared decision making, to acquire the necessary skills to work effectively in groups and to learn to listen more effectively and share ideas with colleagues, students, parents and other administrators.

## What is the Principal's Function in Shared Decision Making?

As teachers, parents, and, in some cases, students are assuming additional responsibilities, principals are seeking to redefine their roles and their relationships with others in their school districts. The task is complicated by a lack of consensus

among educators about what constitutes shared decision making. Occasionally, the problem is exacerbated by feelings of concern: they are being forced too quickly into roles they have not been prepared for or involved in the transition of development.

Dale Mann, a professor at Columbia University Teacher's College, observes that principals find the skills needed to be effective in working with a team are quite different from those most principals were taught or have acquired on the job. Mann states, "They can no longer be old-style C.E.O.'s. Is their new role clear? Not at all" (as cited in Bradley, 1990, p. 22).

Not all principals find the new role of shared decision making troubling. These principals argue that the ideas and the involvement of teachers and other staff members in decision making is just good management practice. But most people with any exposure to shared decision making require a reorientation in the way they think and operate their schools.

Like any other major activity there must be a plan. There is a need for all parties to be participants in the process according to Bruce Goldberg, co-director of the American Federation of Teachers Center for Restructuring. Goldberg identifies a major obstacle; changing the school schedule to create a block of time in which teachers could meet will be a major step toward restructuring for shared decision making. Only after time has been created for them to meet will inquiry take place. "When you try to create a center of inquiry, there the different roles and relationship will ensure", according to Bradley. She encourages forgetting who has the power and how the

principal and the teachers as a group want to shift it. If the struggle for power is the issue, little will be accomplished (Bradley, 1990).

Managing a school is a difficult job, and there never seems to be enough time to do everything. This is a legitimate complaint especially since the principal is held accountable for what happens in the school. Now with shared decision making in practice, a whole array of additional responsibility or accountability results. There is no question that particularly during the first year, there is an additional call on the time and energy of the principal (Marbruger, 1985).

Prior to beginning the planning process, the central district office needs to provide data to each school about the district goals. All principals must receive training in the processes for school improvement (Caldwell, 1988). It is the principal's role to guide the staff and often parents through a systematic school-based planning process.

Prior to beginning the actual inservice in training for shared decision making, it is necessary that certain responsibilities will be shifted from the district to the school. This will require everyone to change roles, routines and relationships. Research on school improvement and organization changes underscores this point: such changes do not happen without leadership and support (David, 1989).

When the district delegates authority to the school four elements are important. The first is access to new knowledge and skills. Real authority comes from knowledge as well as from

delegation. Second, shared decision making intensifies the need for leadership from the principal. Ultimately, the degree to which school-level authority is shared and to how it is shared is in the hands of the principal. Third, school staff needs time to acquire new knowledge and skills. Of equal importance, however, is the time necessary to put these to use by providing schedules which free teachers to participate in decision making and other collegial activities. Finally, salary levels communicate the value attached to the new roles and responsibility (David, 1989).

Shared decision making is a process and should be a decision made by all who are affected by that decision. There are four essential elements needed to make shared decision making successful as part of the implementation of the project. First, staff support must be willing to commit time and energy. Second, all staff members as well as parents and community members must be trained in problem-solving and decision making skills. Third, the central administration and the Board of Trustees must support the process, encourage initial efforts, and provide flexibility. Fourth, good communication between the board of trustees is essential to facilitate and encourage individual school efforts (Barnes, 1990).

Early in this paper, the authors raised the question about the role of the principal in a shared decision making school. When shared decision making has been in place for a period of time, faculty opinion ranges from maintaining the traditional top-down structure to eliminating eventually the position of principal altogether. It is important, however, to understand

that regardless of this differing opinion that the educational program has changed. Agreeing to the idea that the educational agenda will be determined by consensus, the principal facilitates the building of that consensus (Aronstein, Marlow, & Desilets, 1990).

At this point any experienced administrator is asking for specifics. The question is what is one's role as principal. Caldwell and Wood (1988) probably provided the best check list for a principal to work from.

1. Ensure the positive climate necessary for gaining commitment to school improvement decisions.
2. Involve their staff and those clientele served by the school to developing goals and program's goals for improvement.
3. Ensure the staff development programs designed for their staff are related to their school improvement goals.
4. Participate in staff development with their faculty.
5. Ensure that the design of the school improvement plan addresses the major educational problems in their school.
6. Implement and evaluate school instructional improvement with their planning team (p. 52).

## Conclusion

Shared decision making is a new term for a very old management idea. Simply stated, it embodies the idea that the

decision can best be made at the lowest level in the organization or closest position to the problem, preferably where this can lead to solutions. Removing as many barriers as possible means that solutions can be initiated at the site of the problem.

The process of shared decision making is much more than moving power around in school districts. The process means systematically creating more room at all levels for creative problem solving. The process helps to address excessive bureaucratic requirements which have hindered the creation of new ideas and approaches. Shared decision making enables schools to address more effectively the teacher-student learning process.

The key to effective shared decision making is the school principal. Professional staff members should have the widest possible latitude in determining the human material and time allocation needed for learning effectiveness.

Principals need to immerse themselves in the literature of shared decision making prior to attempting to change the environment. They should allow adequate time to initiate dialogue about shared decision making. The principals must work out an agreement with the district administration and board. A framework of understanding must be established. All involved must have a knowledge of this understanding to prevent veto of future decisions. Principals must also convince their staffs they are providing larger spheres of autonomy and new approaches to education effectiveness. Then they must provide the necessary training and find the time for the staff to function properly. The issue is not one of losing decision making but rather

offering initiative to the greatest number of people possible. Thus the principals can expand their power with diversity.

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